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ABSTRACT

This paper uses narrative criticism to analyze the ancient Indian religious poem, the "Bhagavad Gita." This important text, the second most widely translated piece of literature in the world, will receive much-deserved rhetorical attention to its narrative and how this helps construct issues of the self, the world, action, and ontology. Issues of narrative probability and fidelity will be discussed, focusing on the challenges a cross-cultural and temporally-distant artifact provides to the modern critic. (Contains 43 references.) (Author/RS)

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"You were never born; you will never die":

An Inquiry into the Timeless Narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

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Abstract:
This paper uses narrative criticism to analyze the ancient Indian religious work, the *Bhagavad Gita*. This important text, the second most widely translated piece of literature in the world, will receive much-deserved rhetorical attention to its narrative and how this helps construct issues of the self, the world, action, and ontology. Issues of narrative probability and fidelity will be discussed, focusing on the challenges a cross-cultural and temporally-distant artifact provides to the modern critic.

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"*You were never born; you will never die*":
An Inquiry into the Timeless Narrative of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Introduction

The ancient Hindu work, the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Lord"), is an example of a putatively timeless narrative concerning war, duty, the ontology of the self, and the metaphysical status of the world (Crim, 1981; Klostermaier, 1998). Written between 500 BC and 200 BC, it is one of the oldest existing narratives on war and human existence (Audi, 1996; Parrinder, 1995). Radhakrishnan (1998) indicates that it is one of the most widely read and followed religious texts in the modern world.

This religious work uses war and overtly narrative elements to make statements on the nature of good, evil, and human existence (Hiriyanna, 1996). Babbili (1997) indicates that Indian philosophical and moral discourse usually take the enigmatic form of narrative that is largely over-looked by western scholars. Thus, in an attempt to heighten scholarly attention on Indian rhetoric, this paper hopes to gain insight into the constructions of these themes through narrative in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The following two research questions are proposed: *How does the narrative in this text portray good and evil?* and *What other philosophical themes emerge in this narrative?* Answers to these two foci of inquiry shall be provided through the method of narrative criticism as explicated by such scholars as Fisher (1987) and Foss (1996). This paper will first examine the artifact (text) to be analyzed, and then explore the methodology to be utilized. After applying this method to the artifact, discussion will follow, answering the research questions that this study provides. This paper concludes with some comments on the issues of narrative probability and fidelity as exemplified in this important religious text.

The *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient text that has been the leading emissary of Hindu ideas to the Western world. Minor (1986) indicates that it is the most translated book in the world after the Bible. It also was reputed to be Gandhi's favorite text, one that he read on a daily basis. Radhakrishnan (1998) adds that it is the most popular religious poem in Sanskrit. Deutsch (1968) and Zimmer (1989) argue that it is a significant piece of Hindu philosophical work because it synthetically combines many previous themes into its narrative. Some of these include the illusory nature of the phenomenal world, the self, and issues of dharma (duty) that are prevalent in Hinduism (Cross, 1994; Smith, 1986). The *Bhagavad Gita* begins as a martial narrative about a localized war and quickly transforms into a dialogue transcending any particular context of human existence (Neufeld, 1986).

It is important to realize that this relatively short work is situated in the midst of a longer, more literary work entitled the *Mahabharata* (Babbili, 1997). This work is eight times larger than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. The focus of this larger work was an epic power struggle between two factions of a warring family, the Kurus. Eventually, this family is drawn to war; this is where the *Bhagavad Gita* begins. Set against the backdrop of war, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna provide the audience with access to ideas covering all human existence. Arjuna begins to question whether he should fight his own family, even if the war appears to be for a just cause. Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue focuses on this thematic persuasion.

One important aspect to keep in mind about the *Bhagavad Gita* is that it has no known historical author (Deutsch, 1968). While typically attributed to the mythical sage

Vsaya, Western audiences are constantly "annoyed by the untidy historical consciousness of the Indians"(Deutsch, 1968, p. 4) in not keeping a "true" record of the author of this piece. This interesting fact should not derail critical investigation; part of the power of this cross-cultural artifact is in its ability to affect individuals through its almost archetypal narrative message.

This work is laid out in short verses, which shall be cited by book/discourse number and verse number (i.e. 9:23). While many excellent translations exist for the *Bhagavad Gita* (Deutsch, 1968; Edgerton, 1995), this paper shall refer to the translation by Easwaren (1985). Further details on the narrative structure of this work will be provided in the application section of this paper.

Methodology of Narrative

The methodology that shall be used to analyze these artifacts is that of narrative criticism. Much research has focused on using this method of criticism (Carpenter, 1986; Burgchardt, 1985; Lewis, 1987). This method of criticism has its roots in the work of MacIntyre (1981), who indicated "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal"(p. 201). This line of theory concerning the fundamental nature of human communication was developed in earnest by Fisher (1984; 1987). Fisher (1984) argued that the dominant paradigm for human interaction, the "rational world paradigm," was defunct and did not address all the aspects of human communication. It is this reaction against modernity that Toulmin (1992) recounts in his history of modernity and its influences on communication and thought. Thus, in Fisher's (1987) seminal work, Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action, he proposes that human communication takes the form of a

narrative or story that can be examined and criticized accordingly. Two key areas of focus are labeled by Fisher (1984); *narrative probability* is "what constitutes a coherent story" and *narrative fidelity* concerns "whether the stories they [the audience] experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives"(p. 8). Rosteck (1992) further explicates these concepts by discussing "split-reference," which

> .... refer[s] both to the situation in the world and to itself. This split reference corresponds to the characteristics of narrative consistency and closure. As the rhetor constructs the connections between the narrative and the situation, the rhetor implicitly makes the case for the consistency of the narrative [*narrative probability*]. As the rhetor asks an audience to see the story as an example, the rhetor utilizes the narrative characteristic of closure [*narrative fidelity*].(p. 30).

These overriding ideas should be within every narrative and should allow one to extract implications of power and value (McGee & Nelson, 1985).

While the *Bhagavad Gita* has no know author, it still exerts influence over its audience. This lack of subjective control over the power latent in artifacts such as this one could present an opportunity to extend narrative theory to cover "anonymous" texts, such as many of the myths and religious works of the Eastern world. Additionally, this study will focus on reconstructing the narrative implicit in the artifacts to be studied. Later in this paper, some remarks will be made concerning the issues of narrative probability and fidelity (both applicable to audience acceptance).

In regard to this artifact, it is the over-arching narrative that is pertinent to answering the previously mentioned research questions. Babbili (1997) indicates that telling a story is as important as explicitly truth-centered discourse in Hindu culture; this

accounts for the placement of the philosophically tinged *Bhagavad Gita* in the middle of a war-filled family epic. Given that powerful narratives often come from traditional literature (Golden, Berquist, & Coleman, 1997), a narrative analysis of the *Bhagavad Gita* would seem to be extremely useful to extending applied narrative research.

Foss (1996) details some specific areas to describe and evaluate when examining an artifact's narrative; one should examine the details and interactions inherent in the settings, the characters, and the general themes within that story. This criticism shall proceed by examining the settings of each of the artifacts, followed by the characters and the general themes.

When examining these themes, Salvador (1994) indicates that it is important to remember that narrative elements attempt to create a persuasive situation in regard to the audience. Issues of narrative coherence and fidelity can be invoked when a critic is explicating the construction and communication of important themes within an artifact. Additionally, Bass (1985) and Deming (1985) argue that narratives should provide a sense of closure to the audience. Thus, it is reasonable to inquire about whether themes are presented in a full and concluded manner, or if they are halted at awkward points in their development. For this narrative, an important aspect to the "philosophical" themes is the issue of transcendent spirituality; Kirkwood (1983) points out that effective narratives will allow individuals to overcome spiritual obstacles to their "enlightenment" or "growth."

Application

The application of the narrative methodology shall proceed with the artifact being analyzed in terms of major settings, characters, and themes. As previously mentioned,

the emphasis in this "philosophical" story shall be on its thematic elements and the messages it convey.

The *Bhagavad Gita* begins on the battlefield where the two opposing sides of the Kuru family have gathered. This battleground is named "Kurukshetra, the field of dharma"(1:1). Dharma means one's "duty" (Klostermaier, 1998), and it is this field that will test the warrior dharma of Arjuna. This battlefield is noisy and chaotic, with "a tremendous noise ar[ising] of conchs and cowhorns and pounding on drums"(1:13). The next setting that is evident is that of Arjuna's chariot. It is in here that the rest of the narrative plays out; Arjuna and Krishna's dialogue encompasses the rest of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This solitary instrument of war provides a quiet place for Arjuna to rest and think about whether he should fight this war or not. It is here that he and Krishna can hold the serious conversation that they are fated to hold free of interference from others. Time appears to stand still for the two individuals in the chariot.

The main characters in this work are Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna is a mighty warrior who asks Krishna, his charioteer, to drive between the two opposing armies before the battle begins. Once there, Arjuna sees "fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, and brothers, sons and grandsons, in-laws and friends. Seeing his own kinsmen established in opposition, Arjuna was overcome by sorrow"(1:26-27). Arjuna refuses to fight and questions Krishna as to whether he should fight his own family and relations. The rest of the *Bhagavad Gita* focuses on Krishna trying to persuade Arjuna why he should fight this war. At this point, Krishna is only his conversational partner; toward the end of the work, he reveals his true nature. Krishna is an avatar, an incarnation of the

divine power or "self" here on earth. Thus, many of Krishna's statements are issued dogmatically, especially toward the end of the work.

Other characters include the Kurus, aligned against each other as the Pandavas (Arjuna, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Sahadeva, and Nakula) and the Kauravas (Bhishma, Karna, Kripa, Ashvatthama, and Vikarna). While all of these characters are Kurus, the Pandavas ("the sons of Pandu") challenge the ruling power of the Kuru family and are thus distinguished by the new group name (Easwaren, 1985). Krishna is not party to either side in matters of war; he serves as Arjuna's charioteer and advisor. All of these characters (save Arjuna and Krishna) are relatively minor players in this narrative; they drop out after the first chapter and serve mainly to provide the moral dilemma of war to Arjuna. An interesting facet of these characters, however, is their lack of volitional dynamism. Foss (1996) details how characters can be "round" or "flat." "Round characters...possess a variety of traits...their behavior is less predictable than that of flat characters because they are likely to change and to continue to reveal previously unknown traits"(p. 402). "Flat" characters, however, have "one or just a few dominating traits, making the behavior of the character highly predictable"(p. 402). From the depiction of these "distinguished" and "mighty" *warriors*, one can see that they are very ready to do battle; they seem to be predetermined to fight. On the contrary, Arjuna seems to be a "round" character because of his changing attitudes on actually fighting this war. Krishna's character changes his level of self-disclosure to Arjuna and the audience through the course of the narrative; he eventually reveals himself in his true, god-like form to Arjuna.

The dialogue of Arjuna and Krishna covers many themes and philosophical issues. The conversation starts when Arjuna refuses to fight against his own friends and family in the ranks of the opposing army; Krishna then sets out to convince him to uphold his dharma as a warrior. As also noted by Koller (1985), two main themes can be seen to emerge among the various arguments or appeals Krishna gives in his discussion with Arjuna. First, the theme of the relation between the empirical or physical self and the "ultimate" self is evident in this text. The second theme of the path to realizing this "ultimate" self also becomes apparent.

Concerning the metaphysical theme of the relation between the everyday notion one has of self (physical) and the ultimate source of all things (Brahman, or "ultimate" self), Krishna has much to say. While Arjuna fears the evil that lies within killing his own relations and friends, Krishna implores him to uphold his duty. Krishna argues that the physical self is merely an illusion, and that the "ultimate" self within us does not die:

> One man believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay? (2:19-21).

Here the idea is introduced that the world and the self we typically think of as being "real" is an illusion; the actions that we take here really do not affect one's true personality. The real meaning of one's "self" is in relation to the "ultimate" self, personified by Krishna in human guise. It is this self that is described as "The Self of all

beings"(2:30). Krishna continues this explanation by saying "I [Krishna as the personification of ultimate self] am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature…all life [is] my manifestation"(6:30). Even the perceived change in the world all takes place within the ultimate metaphysical reality of the self; "The birth and dissolution of the cosmos takes place in me. There is nothing that exists separate from me"(7:6-7).

Even the multiplicity of forms one observes in everyday life has its basis in ultimate self; "all the different qualities found in living creatures have their source in me"(10:5). Even the creatures themselves (including humans) are all fundamentally united with the ultimate self; "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature, Arjuna, and the beginning, middle, and end of there existence"(10:20). Arjuna eventually acknowledges that "You [Krishna as ultimate self] pervade everything; you are everything"(11:40). Thus, the typical individuation that we intuitively sense about our existence is an illusion; Brahman, or ultimate self, is the true reality.

This true reality gets lost to our the illusions of self we egoistically create due to the play of the "three gunas." These "states of sattva, rajas, and tamas come from me [ultimate self], but I am not in them. These three gunas deceive the world: people fail to look beyond them to me, supreme and imperishable"(7:12-13). The illusion of ego and separateness from the ultimate self are enabled by these shadow-like illusions of the gunas. Krishna is arguing that humans deny their ontological unity with all things because of this illusion of ego individuation. Krishna exclaims to Arjuna that "I am time, the destroyer of all; I have come to consume the world. Even without your participation, all the warriors gathered here will die…I have already slain all these warriors; you will

only be my instrument"(11:32-33). Arjuna is too attached to the illusion that what happens with his physical body and on this empirical battlefield is real; Krishna is revealing to him the ultimate self that lies within every part of this phenomenal world. Krishna counsels Arjuna to accept the reality of the ultimate, undivided self in all: "He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature, who sees the Deathless in the hearts of all that die"(13:27).

The second theme in the *Bhagavad Gita* deals with how one is to act upon becoming enlightened about the true nature of ultimate self. Since one's empirical self is an illusion, how is one to act? What is the goal of action? Initially, Krishna points out that "there is no one who rests for even an instant; every creature is driven to action by his own nature"(3:5). Thus, Arjuna must act in the situation he finds himself in; retreat and inaction are not options. The true sense of being that Arjuna aims for is enlightenment; Krishna indicates that he should "seek refuge in the attitude of detachment and you will amass the wealth of spiritual awareness"(2:49). This attitude of detachment comes from the dispelling of the empirical self; "they live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart"(2:55).

The fundamental impetus for action is the recognition that action is unavoidable and that the self is an illusion. Given these two claims, one must try to act in such a way as to not deny the reality of ultimate self. Krishna implores Arjuna to "use all your power to free the senses from attachment and aversion alike, and live in the full wisdom of the self"(2:68). The rewards of this union with the ultimate self are immense; "they are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of 'I,'

'me,' and 'mine' to be united with the Lord [ultimate self]. This is the supreme state. Attain to this, and pass from death to immortality"(2:71). Arjuna is told to "act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit" (3:9) and to "fight! But stay free from the fever of the ego"(3:30). The overarching theme is that action should be performed with the realization that ego is an illusion; selfless action leads to liberation from the trap of ego attachment.

Discussion

Research Question 1 asks *How does the narrative in this text portray good and evil?* An answer to this can now be provided on the basis of the previously described application of narrative methodology to the artifact under study. The *Bhagavad Gita* portrays evil as a lack of knowledge; thus, when Arjuna is given the various arguments to fight and uphold his dharma, the only sense of good seems to be analogous to enlightenment about the metaphysical basis of human existence. Since all is one with the ultimate spirit, Krishna counsels Arjuna (and the audience) that death and change are truly illusory (2:19-22). "Evil," if it is to be said to be substantially different from any use of "good," seems associated with the willful continuation of the illusion of the empirical self. This illusion causes one to fear death, to try to sate all their desires, and to act selfishly toward others. Krishna states that "Great souls make their lives perfect and discover me [Brahman]; they are freed from mortality and the suffering of this separate existence"(8:15). The issue of separateness is key in the *Bhagavad Gita*; those who are separate from the ultimate soul allow for the intimate experience of suffering and deprivation through individuation. This is why the great Hindu sage Sankara (1992) states that "the soul is subject to evil only through ignorance"(p. 318); lack of

enlightenment allows those who suffer the chance to label their misfortunes "evil," when the true evil is a lack of knowledge on their part. According to Isherwood and Prabhavananda (1999), this lack of enlightenment results in "all selfish motives and actions [which] belong to ethical evil"(p. 58). As Gelblum (1992) indicates, a major motive of the *Bhagavad Gita* is to convey the message of goodness lying in the renunciation of selfish action and intention.

The second research question asks *What other philosophical themes emerge in this narrative?* One theme deals with the nature of one's dharma. The *Bhagavad Gita* appears to make the argument that one should critically examine and accept his or her dharma. At the beginning of this narrative, Arjuna loses the urge to fight in this war that pits him against his family and friends. Krishna uses argument and dialogue to pull him out of this state and allows him to motivate his own acceptance of his dharma. Arjuna is a character who is "round" and dynamic; one should not leave the execution of dharma to fate (Sartwell, 1993), but should instead take a critical role in this activity.

It is this reinterpretation of soldiers' and everyone's dharma in light of selfless action that inform another theme of this work. This narrative emphasizes the fact that the empirical self is some type of illusion— "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature"(10:20). From this given comes the realization that the war within nature, or in the guna-drawn world of our empirical existence, evil is nothing but a lack of ontological enlightenment or honesty. Humans need to be able to admit that their physical self is not the crux or center of this existence and their actions should reflect this disposition.

Evaluations of Narrative Probability and Fidelity

Fisher (1987) argues that "human communication is tested against the principles of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability)" by the audience in any given situation (p. 47). In terms of probability, the issue is "whether a story 'hangs together,' . . . [this] is assessed in three ways: by its [a story's] *argumentative* or *structural coherence*; by its *material coherence*, that is, by comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses; and by *characterological coherence*" (Fisher, 1987, p. 47).

While modern audience reaction to the *Bhagavad Gita* will vary based upon their historic situatedness, some general remarks can be made about the narrative probability of this work. Audiences could potentially see contradictions in the arguments proposed by Krishna; in chapter 2, he appeals to Arjuna's sense of honor (as an individual warrior), and then latter indicates that this same empirical self should not be considered in doing one's duty. Both Agrawal (1992) and Deutsch (1968) indicate that while this may cause confusion, it is part of an ascending argumentative strategy; simple appeals to emotion and prudence are eventually replaced with transcendent moral arguments. An interesting extension to Fisher's theory of narrative can be made on this very point; perhaps structural and argumentative dissonance can impel an audience toward constructing a consistent message out of the text themselves. This point is hinted at by Kashap (1992), who argues that the author(s) of the *Bhagavad Gita* purposely left the message ambiguous to instigate free thinking and message construction by the audience—little was to be taken literally in this work. Thus, the metaphors and description of ultimate reality taking the form of Krishna could be adaptable to audience expectations; one could mold this to a variety of religious bents ranging from mystic theism to atomic pluralism.

Additionally, Krishna's messages of Arjuna's duty to fight in this war and the duty for universal love can be reconciled by charitable audience reconstructions. Perhaps the value of the empirical self is so minute (Krishna's comments on how these warriors are already slain) that duties of justice and love triumph (i.e., the war is just and a warrior's dharma is to fight for the just). In regard to the character of Arjuna, audience acceptance of his "roundness" and "flexibility" might be increased due to the "slow" rate of change he undergoes in the narrative. At the beginning of the text, he is adamantly opposed to the war he initially wanted to wage. Krishna slowly (in narrative time—over the course of the entire work) convinces him to fight, but Arjuna's ultimate agreement to this position does not come until Krishna lets Arjuna *experience* what he has been describing—the site of Krishna as the Self incarnate. Thus, at the end of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna's return to his original position could be described as well earned as opposed to fickle due to this life-altering experience (a "religious experience").

Fisher (1987) regards narrative fidelity as whether a story provides warrants or reasons for adopting and/or acting upon the values embedded within the narrative. These "good" reasons can be analyzed (and are implicitly analyzed by audiences) through the following questions:

1. What are the implicit and explicit values embedded in the message?
2. Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision that the message bears upon? [Are any values] omitted, distorted, and misrepresented?
3. What would be the effects of adhering to the values—for one's concept of oneself, for one's behavior, for one's relationships with others and society, and to the process of rhetorical transaction?

4. Are the values confirmed or validated in one's personal experience, in the lives or statements of others whom one admires and respects, and in a conception of the best audience that one can conceive?
5. Are the values that the message offers those that, in the estimation of the critic, constitute the ideal basis for human conduct? (Fisher, 1987, p. 109)

These issues and questions serve as the narrative focus for evaluating the fidelity of a particular message or story.

In regard to the fidelity of the *Bhagavad Gita*, several comments can be made. Initially, one must identify the values in this story. Krishna's message seems to point to the values of selfless action in doing one's dharma and in transcending the empirical self/ego. In doing this, selfishness and material desires are minimized, as evidenced by Krishna's saying, "Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit"(3:9). Potential trouble could arise in the audience reconciliation and reconstruction of the messages to value duty and the knowledge of one's self in all things. While Krishna's provides the analysis that this empirical world is determined by prakriti (spiritless matter) in 3:34, the audience could still perceive that duty could not compel one to take other humans' lives. As with probability, audience reconstruction of these values and the hierarchy they occupy is crucial; audiences who perceive the war as just and inevitable will very easily accept Krishna's advice to Arjuna to follow the law of dharma.

Some audience perceptions of fidelity could be hampered by the deterministic nature of the world portrayed in this work. It seems that although Arjuna has a choice to transcend the empirical self, the other "flat" characters are all determined to fight. Arjuna states to Krishna "I see our warriors and all the kings who are here to fight. All are

rushing into your awful jaws; I see some of them crushed by your teeth . . . all the warriors of this world are passing into your fiery jaws; all creatures rush to their destruction like moths into a flame"(11:26-27). While this could result in audience sympathy with the "real" and "freely" deliberative character of Arjuna, it could also invite audience concern about duties toward preserving life. Arjuna, in chapter 1, was quite concerned about the worthiness of his opponents and the value of their life—perhaps this will be enough of a concern for human life that audiences will accept the invitation to duty at the cost of pleasant circumstances, either for themselves or others.

As critical participants, the audience must be concerned about the consequences of accepting the values enshrined in this narrative. While questions of ultimate good and evil are better left to moral philosophers than this brief paper, some comments can be made about the potential ethical neutrality of this work. Assuming audiences follow Fisher's (1987) universal value of love in their discourse and action, one could find a monistic message toward selfless action in support of community and other's well-being. If the Self is in all, then the traditional strain of Indian ethics could emerge in the audience's adopted maxims—one should treat others as extensions of *your* self. However, if audiences are situated in a historic situation with socialized concepts of duty that do not follow the ideals of love and justice, violent action could be justified. One must remember that Arjuna is implored to uphold his dharma without selfish attachments to the consequences, even if they are beneficial for him. Thus, consequences to audience adoption of the message within this work could be quite positive given just concepts of dharma; however, "unreflective" duty in Nazi Germany could provide impetus to action that appears to accord to this narrative. This can be avoided if the audience realizes that

issues of duty are not static and do involve intentions of justice and caring for others—thus, Krishna's ultimate focus on transcending the empirical world and concerns thereof, such as power, wealth, etc.

Assuming a well-intentioned and socialized audience, the *Bhagavad Gita* will be very likely to correlate to their experiences in a positive fashion. While the duty in this story is to wage a bloody war, the audience will likely understand that it is a just war and that Arjuna is no "cold-blooded" killer. Perceptions of virtuous behavior often include the upholding of one's duty without selfish reasons for doing so. Audiences are invited to accept and harmonize with the message of doing one's duty out of the motivation to do one's duty, not for money, person gain, etc. It is a safe to speculate that a majority of the audiences receptive to this work would not look favorably on doing "charity work" for monetary gain—this same idea of selfless action is upheld in the *Bhagavad Gita*. These values do appear to be ideal, in so far as Arjuna is forced to uphold his duty to do the just and to transcend selfish reasons for action. Instead of advising Arjuna to ultimately act on the basis of emotional and prudential concerns (as Krishna began his persuasive discourse with), he offers the ground of all action in knowledge of the illusory nature of the empirical self and the consequent dissipation of selfish motivation for action. Inaction and an absorption within the matters of the empirical world are both shunned in this text; instead, a "middle way" is offered to the audience, in which actions are done with the perfected state of mind in an imperfect (unjust) world.

Conclusion

This critical examination has focused on the ancient Hindu religious poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*. This artifact uses narrative to construct various themes and appeals to

the audience. It is this use of narrative that could be cross-culturally significant and timeless (Flood, 1996). This paper has analyzed this artifact through the methodology of narrative criticism. The artifact has been described, along with an explication of the methodology. This critical method has been applied to the artifact, with the aim of answering the research questions of *How does the narrative in this text portray good and evil?* and *What other philosophical themes emerge in this narrative?* The study has shown that the artifact portrays evil as an inclination toward selfish action and the refusal to acknowledge a transcendent "ultimate" self behind the physical self of each human. Mohanty (1997) highlights the crucial aspect of selfishness and lack of dharma that are castigated in the *Bhagavad Gita*. That which is good is that which leads one toward enlightenment, a difficult task in the violent battlefields of the *Mahabharata* and the human condition itself. The issues of narrative probability and fidelity have been examined in an exploratory manner, discovering that some potential contradictions and ambiguities within the text might actually serve to increase the import of the narrative. This study does not claim to exhaust the hermeneutic import of this text; on the contrary, it hopes to stimulate more work on the narrative elements within such interesting and influential Eastern works. The *Bhagavad Gita* argues that there is a fundamental unity to all that we experience in this illusory world, and our empirical self is not the foundation of our true selves. Heeding these truths, the work in question admonishes selfishness and attempts to instill some inclination toward selfless action in the hearts and minds of its audience.

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